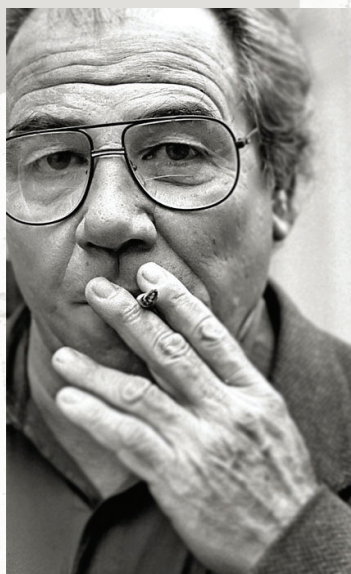


THE VIOLENCE OF IMAGES VIOLENCE AGAINST THE IM. JEAN BAUDRILLARD

PREFACE BY PAUL FOSS

**"IF YOU DON'T LIKE REALITY, PLEASE
DO NOT MAKE EVERYBODY ELSE
DISGUSTED WITH IT!"**

PREFACE: "IF YOU DON'T LIKE REALITY, PLEASE DO NOT MAKE EVERYBODY ELSE DISGUSTED WITH IT!"



"Violence de L'image, 'Violence Faite À L'image,'" appearing here in English translation for the first time, is a paper Jean Baudrillard was originally commissioned to present at the International Symposium attached to "media_city," Seoul's 2002 Biennial (the directors of the symposium were Sung-Hee Kim and Nancy Barton). Slated for later publication, these plans were disrupted when Baudrillard died on March 6, 2007—"following a long illness," said the NY Times, but the Wikipedia entry mentions "typhoid" (and rumors have circulated about prostate cancer¹). The text therefore fell into a kind of posthumous limbo. Other cuts of the same

essay abound: just to mention some entries in the European Graduate School's online library (www.egs.edu/Baudrillard), there is "The Violence of the Image" (n.d.), "Dust Breeding" (CTheory, 2001), "Photography, or The Writing of Light" (CTheory, 2000), and "Photographies: For Illusion Isn't the Opposite of Reality..." (n.d.). There is even a YouTube video of Baudrillard reading an English translation of extracts from the "same" piece at the EGS in 2004. But a lot of the sentiments and phraseology contained in the present text are sprinkled throughout *The Transparency of Evil* (1990), *The*

Illusion of the End (1992), *The Perfect Crime* (1995), *Impossible Exchange* (1999), and *The Vital Illusion* (2000).

1. In fact, Jean Baudrillard died of cancer, after a long remission.

Baudrillard's symposium manuscript was the basis for this translation. It stands out immediately on a number of scores: his typical, carefully constructed spread of odd paragraphs and spacing, creating the impression of sudden shifts in stress and intonation—the poet's standard tools. Then there is his singular style of homegrown terminology, whose full resonance in French fails to find a sympathetic English ear: "singularité," for instance (such as "the singularity of ... thought, the singularity of being a single event, similar in a sense to the singularity of the world through which it is made into an event" ["Radical Thought," 1994]), and "transparation," which despite a certain currency in academic and online vanity circles, resists pinning down (meaning, as it does, the fleeting apparition or shining through of things). Last but not least is Baudrillard's habit of using cryptic shorthand when deploying his references: in this essay, it is hard to tell whether "Big Brother" refers to George Orwell's dictator in 1984 or he popular U.S. reality show where contestants, locked

in an apartment with round-the-clock surveillance cameras, get to be evicted by viewers' call-in votes (whereas a certain rigor remains possible in Baudrillard's stark orthography, it doesn't really make that much sense unless you are aware of the earlier references). The confusion gets compounded further in the discussion of *Loft Story* (the French and Canadian adaptation of *Big Brother*), where you just can't tell if it's the show or the current fad in downtown living. These shunts or switch words don't easily survive translation, but it helps, I think, to indicate in square brackets where some of the more tricky transitions lie. (One unavoidable insertion concerns Baudrillard's reference in the text to an obscure notebook entry by the eighteenth-century German scientist and epigrammist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, an intimate of Kant and Goethe and the inventor, among other claims to fame, of the Xerox copy machine.)

My own connection to Baudrillard goes back to 1983, when I translated—along with Sydney philosopher Paul Patton—"The Precession of Simulacra" (published in *Simulations* [New York: Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series] and *Art & Text* [Melbourne, Australia]), followed the same year by *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series) and then, in 1990, the anthology *Revenge of the Crystal* (Sydney: Pluto Press/Power Institute). Perhaps ten or so other such translations have appeared under my name over the years. All this intimacy has naturally led to a certain reputation on my part, most pointedly at the level of supposed influence and idolatry, which I have largely rejected on the grounds that it confuses content with intent.² I originally got "into" Baudrillard to explore simulation in the contemporary sphere, but then was immediately struck by the power of his words to get under people's skin. Right from the beginning, I suspected that his critical ideas and unique writing style were a basic ruse to shake us out of our complacent thinking, especially in the post-Marxist left. I suspected that he was not to be taken literally. I suspected a Manichean lamb in wolf's clothing; a sensitive, withdrawn Stylite figure such as we find in Buñuel's *Simon of the Desert* (1965), living by choice atop a column of words of his own making. I suspected that the overt cynic and nihilist we call Baudrillard was a mere projection of postmodern resentment, the hostility directed at whoever presents himself as a likely target for frustration and assignment of blame. A role, mind you, that Baudrillard—the self-confessed progeny of "peasants," an academic outsider, "computer illiterate," and early translator of Bertolt Brecht and Peter Weiss (whose *Marat/Sade* and *The Aesthetics of Resistance* now appear tailor-made for understanding the philosopher's key strategy)—seems to have been "born" to play.

Baudrillard's seductively complex yet painstakingly machined series of critical assertions also amounts to something like the Third Temptation of Christ in the Wilderness, where the Devil tries to convince Jesus to free himself from

a pinnacle by jumping off and relying on angels to break his fall—an appropriate allegory of radical thought's fall from grace after May 1968, in which the main inspiration for Baudrillard's oeuvre can be located. A sociology teacher at the Université Paris X-Nanterre during the late 1960s, he participated in the events of May 1968 when the French Communist Party on the whole failed to support the mostly student and shiftless rioters, the *enragés*. Thereafter Baudrillard's writings began to assume an increasingly provocative tone, and a marked shift away from his earlier Situationist-cum-Frankfurt School stance. In his 1973 "provocation," *The Mirror of Production*, he announced his divorce from classical Marxism, seeing it as little more than the naturalizing of capitalist society. After this fiery breach, Baudrillard's work turned more toward symbolic exchange, Bataille's notions of expenditure and excess, and a more Nietzschean, if "aristocratic" mode of address. As he explains,

I have never forgiven culture, it contains too many unacceptable elements.... Everything has now turned into culture and it has even become very difficult to go beyond one's own culture since one finds it everywhere. There will even be a moment when one will not be able to find any deserts.

One comes across these words in "Vivisectioning the 1990s," an interview published in *CTheory* in 1995 (and available online at the EGS website). Defending here what he describes as his "relativizing" vision of the world, that of "the end of the end," he also admits that, "I am quite aware that such a position is provocative, paradoxical, and ultimately unacceptable":

I also believe it is a Stoic's duty, if there is one, not to subliminate, not to distance oneself, but to say that: such is the rule of the game and this is how I play it.... [But] I do recognize that such a position exposes itself to very serious charges.

In another interview—"Between Difference and Singularity" (an open discussion following his reading of "The Global and the Universal" in June 2002 at EGS)—he even claims,

You are not dealing with the real Baudrillard. I have sent a clone. ... I say the most nihilistic things, yes, but the resolution of this pessimistic content is in a very glorious form ... you can describe the most apocalyptic system, but you can do it in a way that is not at all apocalyptic. ... It's always a duel.

Baudrillard sums up this agonistic, neo-anchoritic position perfectly in "Radical Thought," saying finally in answer to all those "good apostles" who continue to ask the difficult questions, "If you don't like reality, please do not make everybody else disgusted with it! ... You can never let people despair."

The real difficulty of reading and certainly translating Baudrillard is that, as poetic provocation, as "Stoic" equanimity in the face of strife and despair, as pure *katalepsis*, it resists clarification and rationalization. One can attempt this, of course. The general problem, however, has less to do with explication than simply drawing attention to the shimmering, "disillusioning" phantasia in the depths of Baudrillard's image-theory—the image as both the formal medium and exit point of theory. But there can be no confusion as to

this singular feature in texts like "The Violence of Images, Violence Against the Image": not only do they literally perform themselves, flow out of their very form (the unique eloquence of Baudrillard's prose hangs seductively over the harsher undertones of any particular thought), but they in turn get deformed through the "objective" lens of constant synkatathesis, which is nothing more than the process of sifting through good and bad impressions—"so as to see distinctly," according to Marcus Aurelius, "what kind of a thing it is in its substance, in its nudity, in its complete entirety" (*Meditations*). Or is it the opposite of this, a radical abandonment of the *eupatheia* resulting from "correct judgment"? A kind of afterlife incineration of the classical Stoic cosmology of everything as "transmuted and diffused, assuming a fiery nature by being received into the Seminal Reason [*logos spermatikos*] of the Universe"? Perhaps even a transparent doctrine of *adiaphora*, or "things different"? Something like this seems to be the main operation in play here.

One would add, however, the obvious scissors-and-paste approach of a busy working critic on the run, an understandable stratagem for satisfying all the demand. But it simultaneously reveals a methodical and ruthless scrutiny of the very minutiae of his unruly system. It is this self-examination that lends a particular lambency to all of Baudrillard's lectures, podcasts, interviews, and books, yet it is also the ultimate impediment to rescuing their profundity from a fate of cosmic singularity. Whether it is from a fear of being tied down or, which is more likely, through the author's own shameless refusal of indifference, no one can say. No one can say if his life and death was the consummate act of a martyr or, as Canetti once remarked about the face of animals, it reveals some mirror reflection sniggering at us. "Defacing the currency" has a special meaning for all Cynics and Stoics (as well as for counterfeit Stoics), most especially in the practice of "possible solutions" or *hypnognomata*. The old Platonic belief that all the world's physical and emotional problems are caused by the false perception of things, that "perhaps the world is having us on," sits at the heart of Baudrillard's puppet theater. Jarry-style pataphysics, or the science of "imaginary solutions," simply comes at the problem from the other direction, from deep within the mirror of impressions.

Strolling again across the sulfurous terrain of Baudrillard's *Stoa Poikile* (theory as "the painted porch") leads me to the inescapable conclusion that here was a man not opposed to coming down off his perch if he felt like it, even if he sometimes refused to climb back up again. The man in a tub stops, goes back, adding and removing details, polishing and scrubbing. He never stops scrambling and de-scrambling his thoughts, like a Rubik's Cube. And a close reading of the following textual "ready-made" may provide a few extra clues to what one day will add up to a very different picture of The Man Who Was Baudrillard.

Paul Foss

2. See my *The &-Files: "Art & Text,"* 1981-2002 (forthcoming *Whale and Star*, 2009) for further comments along these lines.

Copyright of ArtUS is the property of Foundation for International Art Criticism and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.